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ABSTRACT

School counseling educators and practitioners frequently find themselves so focused on the daily activities of serving their schools that rarely do they have the luxury of considering a long-term and large-scale vision for the profession. Yet a vision that anticipates the future needs of school counseling in a proactive manner is just what the profession must develop in order to survive, prosper, and be truly effective. Looking at the current state of school counseling through a systems worldview, it is noted that programs are often developed in response to problems, rather than proactively, and in isolation of understanding or involving the larger system that surrounds schools and that must be addressed for change to occur. This chapter proposes that school counseling, and the educational field as a whole, must move to an integrated, multicultural, systemic approach in order to truly attain large-scale, effective, and long-lasting educational and personal success for all students. (Contains 15 references.) (GCP)

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By

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Chapter Nine

School Counseling in the Twenty-First Century: A Systemic Multicultural Approach

Shari Tarver Behring

As school counseling educators and practitioners, we frequently find ourselves so focused on the daily activities of serving our schools that rarely do we have the luxury of considering a long-term and large-scale vision for our profession. Yet a vision that anticipates the future needs of school counseling in a proactive manner is just what our profession must develop in order to survive, prosper, and be truly effective. I do have dreams about ideal school counseling services. These dreams seem unattainable to me at times; nonetheless, they are dreams of a systemic multicultural approach by the field of school counseling in the twenty-first century.

A Systems Worldview

As a graduate student in educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, I was profoundly affected by the systems theory taught in family therapy, school consultation, and educational curriculum and reform. For the first time, I learned how to look at a situation from a bigger context and from many different perspectives. I also learned to consider structure as well as process issues, which are sometimes hidden, when understanding how and why family systems and school systems function as they do. I began to understand all professional activities as taking place inside of systems. Some are smaller systems, such as an individual school, and some bigger systems, such as the surrounding community, the local school district, the state department of education, and the federal branch of education.

Sarason (1971) was one of the first in the fields of education and counseling to identify the culture of school systems and some associated characteristics: communication patterns linked to the school, leadership styles of principals, implicit school rules, morale issues of teachers, power and who controls it, various school professional roles, and the challenge of teaching diverse learners. He also described the rigid and often competitive subsystems and roles of teachers, administrators, specialists, custodians, and other staff in schools. Sarason noted how the school organization dictates school structure, resources, and job definitions. The organization of the school, in turn, is a reflection of the beliefs and influence of the surrounding community; current educational politics; funding; and local, state, and federal educational governing bodies.

Many of Sarason's observations about the problem of change in schools still remain true: rigidity of roles among school professionals; entrenched school structures not set up to truly meet the educational needs of diverse student bodies; and larger political and educational governing systems that dictate policy, which in turn makes local school change next to impossible to accomplish. However, school counselors have increased their awareness of what is needed for improvement of professional services. We now are better able to understand our role as school counselors in the context of the larger educational environment, composed of the school organization, parents, students, and the surrounding community. Beyond counseling services, we see our jobs as having a direct relationship to educational areas, such as curriculum and placement, that lead to academic success. We have begun to understand the importance of data-driven goals for change, and measured outcomes that demonstrate programs that promote student success, even though we do not always have time to apply these measures.

Despite these advances, the primary focus of school counselors often continues to be handling academic programming, discipline, and attendance in a rigidly defined role, separate from others who are integral for the counseling program to succeed at the school (parents, teachers, administrators, and community). To make things worse, school counselors are sometimes ostracized by others who resent someone who can sit in an office and work individually with students. Ironically, individual student contact by school counselors is often bureaucratic in nature and frequently not rewarding, because the counselor's activities do not address the

full potential of students due to the structure of the counselor advising process, which restricts creative, individualized educational services. The administration frequently pressures school counselors to maintain behavioral control and academic performance levels through advisement and programming, often blaming the counselor for problems in these areas, problems that are more often due to a restrictive, rigid, and even prejudicial structure of the school, as well as other outside systems that contribute to student problems but are not interlinked with school services, such as dysfunctional families, economic hardships, racism, and so forth.

Change is possible only when the greater system is understood and confronted as a part of the change process. School counselors must assess the political and cultural climate that surrounds a school by gathering information from all sources. These should include school personnel at all levels, students, parents, community, and state and federal educational and political governing agencies. A historical understanding of the school and the people within it can reveal the origin of current practices and suggest changes that avoid past mistakes. For example, an ineffective school counselor, or a principal who did not support counseling services in the past, could lead to a small and rather powerless counseling program at that school in the present. Each school has a unique culture that can be understood by looking at the larger system and its history. Leadership, morale, power, hidden rules, communication patterns, and student and community needs all need to be assessed. Each school will then be understood as a unique, dynamic system interconnected to other systems.

School counselors can use their understanding of the school system to assess what is working and what is not. This type of service is very different from the current activities of school counselors and has been called *organizational change, social advocacy, industrial psychology,* and *systemic intervention.* It requires understanding and agreement from all constituencies involved. Change then will occur in a broad-based, planned, and very powerful manner.

What would this type of activity do to the current role of school counselors? It would definitely change our current job responsibilities! Our systems analysis would reveal different, and much more effective, activities for us to do. Each systemic analysis would yield its own unique school counseling job description. We would continue to use our counseling

competencies to promote individual and school success and adjustment, but we would now share our role and activities with others (teachers, specialists, parents, community members) connected to the school who also have skills and resources to create change that promotes school success, and who would join us in a systematic, collective change effort. Thus, our work and roles would become much less defined and much more fluid and collaborative in order to increase the effectiveness of services and avoid waste of time and resources.

Meanwhile, back at the institutions of higher learning, school counseling educators would do well to note the systemic analyses of surrounding schools and could, through a similar structural analysis, discover that their own universities and colleges suffer from role rigidity and stagnation as well. The combined data from all educational levels would be used by school counseling training programs along with other teacher and administrator training programs to restructure the higher educational institution to support and contribute to the needs of the larger system of education, community, and political climate of which the institution is a part. Departments might dissolve in favor of collaborative educational initiatives across educational areas. Classes could be team taught at public school sites where systemic change was being implemented while students learned about it.

As systemic change agents, all members of the systems in which we operate educationally (community; family; school; college; local, state and federal educational boards; and the greater political arena) would interact and change one another while moving toward the most effective conditions for school success. Think for a moment how different this would be from the much less connected way school counselors and these various constituents operate now.

Why would anyone in their right mind agree to the systemic approach just described? Because many of our urban schools are in crisis, and nothing else seems to be working. We are overwhelmed by the diversity of learners and the inability of our antiquated system to meet the students' educational and adjustment needs. Programs are developed in response to problems, rather than proactively, and in isolation of understanding or involving the larger system that surrounds schools and that must be addressed for change to occur. We often are unaware of duplicate programs, relevant data about the problems and proven solutions, and forces that might help or,

conversely, work against, our efforts. School counseling, and the educational field as a whole, must move to an integrated, systemic approach in order to truly attain large-scale, effective, and long-lasting educational and personal success for all students.

Multicultural School Systems

Another systemic characteristic that has had a profound impact on schools and school counselors is the cultural background of those who are connected to the school. Here, culture has a broad meaning in comparison to the school culture as described by Sarason. Culture is defined in terms of membership in subgroups based on gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, and handicapping conditions; each group has values, beliefs, norms, traditions, language, and other features that are distinct and that define the group (Tarver Behring, Cabello, Kushida, & Murguia, 2000; Tarver Behring & Gelinas, 1996; Tarver Behring, Gelinas, Peyton, & Munoz, 1995). Culture is a multifaceted component that includes individual identity, group identity, cognition, communication, and behavioral patterns. Further, there exist multiple cultural group memberships for any one person, rendering culture a broad definition with much variation within groups as well as between them (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993; Sue & Sue, 1990).

Within school settings, children and educators have cultural backgrounds; the school structure and the greater systems that surround it, as outlined previously, also have unique cultural characteristics. There is a growing recognition of how a dominant European American male worldview influences the manner in which the school system operates (Harris, 1996). European Americans, who make up the mainstream culture in the United States, may be the least aware of the way their culture influences their behavior and interactions, most likely due to the dominance of their culture and the absence of a perceived need to acknowledge diversity among non–European Americans (Lynch & Hanson, 1992). Lack of awareness of one's own culture and that of others can create a mismatch of educational and counseling services (Hall, 1997).

Understanding one's own culture in relationship to other cultures is a necessary prerequisite to culturally sensitive school services (Tarver Behring & Ingraham, 1998). Cultural awareness

at the beginning of the helping relationship has been found to play a significant role in the process and outcome of counseling when the counselor and client are from different backgrounds (Sue & Sue, 1990). The identification of characteristics of one's own cultural beliefs is especially important for European Americans because of the tendency of European American groups to view culture in an ethnocentric manner—the European American culture as the primary or prevailing culture (Lynch & Hanson, 1992). This belief system inhibits awareness for and acceptance of ethnically different cultures and could lead to a misconception that educational and counseling approaches, as they currently exist, are sensitive and effective for all cultures.

By developing a multiplistic cultural self-identity, that is, developing an awareness that each person holds membership in multiple groups with associated privilege or prejudice, counselors can move beyond an ethnocentric worldview (Tarver Behring & Ingraham, 1998). As educators, counselors, and consultants from all possible cultural backgrounds develop self-awareness of diversity and how it differs from others, they take the necessary first step in moving toward an understanding of conscious, culturally appropriate services in the public schools.

If we return to the previous discussion of the school as a system, we might think for a moment about the huge impact of culture on the structure and activities of the school system. The predominant culture in general in our country is European American; therefore, it follows that the beliefs and values by which our public schools are set up are also European American. Some examples of European American values in contrast with those of certain Latino cultures include emphasis on individual versus group achievement, competition versus cooperation in earning grades, and analytical or scientific versus holistic learning approaches (Dana, 1993). (For a more detailed examination of European American culture, see Dana, 1993; Katz, 1985; and Sue & Sue, 1990.)

School counseling programs for students are also culturally loaded with European American values, as is the field of psychotherapy. Yoder and Kahn (1993) describe how the fields of counseling and psychology in the United States often reflect European American privileged male standards without recognizing that differences from these standards exist and are equally valid. Others have discussed the cultural biases of theory and practice in the fields of counseling and psychology (Hall, 1997; Harris, 1996; Pedersen, 1997; Sue & Sue, 1990; Sue & Zane,

1987). Because school counseling services occur in a European American school system, programs also reflect approaches best suited for European Americans. There is little information in the school counseling literature about how to adjust school counseling approaches for work with specific cultural groups. Our theories and approaches about how to build relationships, promote goals, and intervene are based on research with European Americans for European Americans.

What happens when the students attending a European American–based school system are not themselves European American? Harris (1996) has noted that "there will be a lack of mutual goals, frustration and disappointment" (p. 3) when cultural differences are not addressed. In Los Angeles, the high dropout rates, academic failure, and crime on campus are likely related to the negative reactions of students within culturally foreign schools and counseling programs. As systemic and culturally multiplistic thinkers, school counselors can work with those within an existing ethnocentric school system to develop greater cultural awareness and acceptance through systemic self-study, and then to set goals toward a multicultural system that is truly reflective of and responsive to the diversity of *all* of those who are in it, and those who surround it.

Changing school systems to be responsive to multiple cultures does not mean lowering educational standards. It does, however, mean changing the process of achieving these standards to increase the potential for success for the diversity of learners within the system. The school counselor could work with administrators, teachers, parents, and community members in a multitude of ways. These include helping school staff to understand multiple cultures and develop cultural self-awareness and awareness of others; setting inclusive academic goals that are fairly measured using qualitative and quantitative culture-fair achievement measures; collaborating with others in the school and community to offer multiple language-based programs and curricula that are appropriate for diverse learning styles; offering equity in advisement and academic programming to ensure the same high educational outcome for all students regardless of culture (such as completing high school and entering post-secondary institution of their choice); providing culturally appropriate counseling programs that are integrally linked to other aspects of the system, such as the classroom, parents, community, the educational mission, and so forth; linking the above efforts with those of people who are working

in a similar manner at the elementary through college levels for consistent system-wide change; organizing school and community representatives and political lobbyists to interact with the larger governing systems surrounding the school, in order to encourage these other systems to engage in the systemic process toward collaborative educational change efforts; demonstrating permanent, successful systemic outcomes through system-wide, data-based measurement.

What might multiculturally inclusive school counseling services look like in the twenty-first century? Here are just a few examples. A school counselor might oversee paraprofessionals who use technology, such as computers, to program all students into college prep classes; create on-site training for parent groups from diverse backgrounds to learn the same curriculum as the students, with input from teaching staff, and in native languages; review language-based programs and consult personnel in order to provide effective bilingual education; team teach a school-site-based graduate class with school personnel and parents who are representative of, and share knowledge and skills about, the diversity and associated worldview and needs of the surrounding community; advocate with school administrators for culturally appropriate curricula and programs; coordinate a system-wide cultural awareness program for students, teachers, administrators, school counselors, special educational staff, and parents; organize a representative governing body (teachers, parents, students, administrators) that engages in collaborative decision making about culturally appropriate educational assessment, curricula, and support services at each culturally unique school; create a mentoring program for all students, not just those at risk, to provide educational support and advisement and to promote attendance and retention; coordinate on-site community services for health, education, employment, and counseling; provide K–12 student courses and create student portfolios for college selection, admission procedures, post-college job application, and financial aid; conduct and publish research about the successful multicultural approaches in the school as a model for others to follow.

Once ethnocentrism in American education and the harm it causes to non–European American students are understood, a multicultural systemic change effort clearly becomes the right thing to do. Certainly, some of those who have enjoyed the privileges of membership in the dominant culture will resist giving up the associated benefits of privilege rather than helping

to create a more equitable situation. However, allowing inequitable standards to be learned by students, regardless of cultural background, is a disservice to all students; the rich benefits to the entire system of developing multiple educational approaches that are reflective of educational diversity more than outweigh the costs of change.

In the next century, I look forward to the time when a multicultural worldview is infused into all aspects of the educational system, so that we no longer need to use the word *multicultural* to describe specific services. I believe in the continual moral evolution of the fields of school counseling and education as a whole and the integrity in each of us to promote an inclusive school environment where each student truly experiences equity in educational and counseling services within a school system created for all students.

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